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SUBJECT: THAILAND'S DEEP SOUTH -- VIOLENCE UPTICK AND HARDENING POSITIONS

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert Clarke. Reason: 1.4 (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra announced February 16 that the Royal Thai Government (RTG) will use a scheme of color coding to classify and zone villages in Thailand's three southernmost provinces. Villages where incidents of violence remain high and the RTG believes it is getting low cooperation in suppressing Muslim insurgents will be labeled "red." Villages thus zoned will lose access to provincial development and other government funding. The Cabinet has also approved deployment (in 4-5 months) of 12,000 additional troops to the South. A powerful car bomb in Narathiwat province on February 17 killed 6 and wounded scores more, reportedly mostly Malaysian tourists. This capped several weeks of continuing violence and escalating use of bombs, still limited to the deep South. PM Thaksin appears bent on pursuing a southern policy that is heavily weighted towards tough security measures. His critics insist that this approach will further alienate the Muslim communities and exacerbate the violence. End Summary.

LATEST GOVERNMENT DEEP SOUTH POLICIES: ZONING AND PUNISHING HOT VILLAGES, AND A NEW SECURITY FORCE

¶12. (U) On February 16, PM Thaksin announced a new government program to classify villages in the Muslim majority population provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat in Thailand's deep South into red, yellow and green zones. The classifications will denote a government-assessed degree of violence and cooperation with the authorities, with "red" indicating a violence-plagued, low cooperation area, "green" no violence and supportive citizenry, and "yellow" something in-between. Thaksin said that red zone villages will be cut off from government financing for provincial development and the Small, Medium, Large (SML) village enterprise program. Yellow zone villages will receive reduced benefits, and only villages in green zones will get full financing. He justified the policy as preventing government funds from being used by separatists for bombs and guns with which to attack RTG soldiers and officials (although this connection has not been established). The Prime Minister unveiled this zoning scheme in Narathiwat, the province in which the highest number of red zone villages are located. Reportedly, of 1570 villages in the three provinces, 358 are classified "red," including 204 in Narathiwat.

¶13. (C) Senator Chirmsak Pinthong, a former TV commentator, and a strong critic of PM Thaksin, told Polcouns February 18 that the Thai National Security Council (NSC) devised the zoning scheme in November 2004 simply as a means of keeping track of southern hotspots. However, he said, it was Thaksin himself, "in another example of his emotional, unadvised reactions," who decided to link punitive distribution of government funding to the zones. Senator John Ungphakon, another frequent critic of Thaksin, said that the new program was certain to backfire and provoke more, not less violence. These negative reactions were typical of other opposition commentary. The English-language newspaper "The Nation" ran a front page editorial February 18 which labeled the PM's "us or them" attitudes toward the South as "simplistic," and warned that the zone scheme was "collective punishment" which will only push already resentful and marginalized people into the arms of Islamic militants.

¶14. (U) Earlier in the week, on February 15, the Thaksin-led Cabinet approved deployment of a new 12,000 strong military unit, the 15th Infantry Division, to reinforce security forces in the South. The RTG announced that the new unit, which will be in place in 4-5 months, is intended to protect local residents and suppress separatists. It will be staffed by civil affairs and psychological warfare specialists as well as combat troops.

CONTINUING, AND ESCALATING, VIOLENCE IN THE DEEP SOUTH

¶15. (SBU) On February 17, a powerful car bomb, probably detonated remotely by cell phone, exploded around 7 pm in front of a restaurant in Sungai Kolok, Narathiwat, near the border with Malaysia. The blast killed four persons instantly (two more died later) and injured about 50 others. Several of the dead and many of the other casualties reportedly were Malaysian tourists. There was damage to

other restaurants and facilities in the tourist and entertainment area. Thai newspapers are portraying the car bomb as the work of Muslim separatists and an immediate response to PM Thaksin's zoning scheme, but the evidence for that conclusion is not yet clear. Thaksin himself, however, reportedly responded to the car bomb news with a declaration that he would not allow a single inch of Thailand to be separated "even if blood covers the land."

16. (SBU) The Sungai Kolok car bomb capped several weeks of escalating violence, marked almost every day by individual killings by ambush or bombs. On February 10, Pracha Therat, Governor of Narathiwat, narrowly escaped being killed when a bomb exploded near where he and other senior provincial officials were watching a military parade. This incident was only one of several recent bold acts of violence which indicate a growing technical and tactical skills of the perpetrators.

17. (C) Comment: For a few days after the huge February 6 electoral victory of his Thai Rak Thai (TRT), Thaksin was making slightly conciliatory statements about how he intended to approach the violence in the South. His swing through the deep South this week was partially to show he is paying attention to the needs of the region. When Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of opposition Democrat Party (DP) -- which swept the parliamentary races in the South -- publicly offered to work with the government to defuse tensions, Thaksin seemed to accept the proffered assistance. With the election behind him, the opportunity seemed ripe for the Prime Minister to rethink the RTG's southern strategy. However, Thaksin has quickly reverted to form, continuing his characteristic bellicose rhetoric and stances, backed up with an even greater reliance on tough security measures. End Comment.

BOYCE